

Amchi Gege's room was the center of everything, says Colin Millard

written by Jitka Polanská



Colin Millard, as a freshly graduated anthropologist with an interest in Bon and Tibetan medicine, spent from 1996 to 1998 eighteen months in Dhorpatan, a place in the western part of Nepal. He observed how future amchis, doctors of Tibetan traditional medicine, were educated at the local medical school and wrote his PhD thesis about it.

Colin, you gave your two-year-old son the name of the son of the Irish god of medicine. Does it have anything to do with your professional interest in the systems of traditional medical science?

I was attracted to the name partly because of my interest in medicine. Cian is a Celtic name; and at the same time, it exists as an Iranian name. My wife is Iranian, and we sought a name which would make both of us happy.

Let us talk about your professional background and get from there to your research of traditional medicine in Bon tradition.

I began studying anthropology in 1988. I graduated in 1993, in five years instead of four because I took a year out to travel around India. And that's how I got interested in Tibetan medicine.

You did not go there with this already in mind?

No, I was quite interested in Hindu tantrism at that time. But I came across many Tibetan people in India. When I arrived in Bombay, the Dalai lama happened to be there. In Delhi, I stayed in a Buddhist guesthouse and I heard that the Kalachakra initiation was happening. I traveled to Sarnath in northeast India, the place where Buddha Shakyamuni gave his first teaching, and sat through the

Kalachakra initiation for three weeks. It was fascinating, there were around one hundred thousand people there. It was my first deep experience of Tibetans and their culture in India.

How did the general fascination narrow down to a specific interest?

To cut a long story short, I met a Tibetan lama in South India who suggested that I should study Tibetan medicine. He knew somebody in Ladakh, so I ended up going to Ladakh the following year – to do research with traditional medical practitioners. I spent five months there looking at how a Ladakhi *amchi* had been supported by the NGO Save the Children Fund.

You had not encountered Bon yet.

No, it was only during my PhD studies that I shifted to Bon traditional medicine, which I observed in detail later, at the Bon medical school in Dhorpatan.

Before that, I went to Tibet, to explore whether I could do research in Lhasa on that topic, but it did not seem to be feasible. I also went to a Tibetan medical school in Sarnath and to the Chagpori Tibetan Medical Institute of Trogawa Rinpoche situated in Darjeeling. Trogawa Rinpoche was a famous doctor of traditional medicine. I was thinking of studying what they were doing there but then I met Yongdzin Rinpoche and my plans changed.

Where did you meet him? And how did you know about Yongdzin Rinpoche?

I had heard about Bon culture during my early visits to India and wanted to know more. I went to Tritten Norbutse when it was still mainly a building site, probably in 1994, I can't remember exactly. I did not find anybody there at that time. I went back a couple of years later and met Rinpoche then. When I told him that I wanted to do research about Tibetan medicine, Rinpoche told me about the Bon medical school in Dhorpatan, in the west of Nepal.

The school was established not long before, is it correct?

That's right, in 1992. I went there four years later, in 1996, the year when the Maoist insurgency in Nepal started. It went on for ten years.

What did it mean for the people who lived there?

Dhorpatan valley is situated next to Rukum and Rolpa districts, which were Maoists strongholds. It is a very remote place, so in case of trouble you cannot expect police or army intervening quickly. I remember that when I was deciding whether to go, that year, a few Nepali people in Kathmandu told me "do not go there, it is full of Maoists, it is dangerous". But Tibetans from Tritten Norbutse thought there was no real danger at that moment, and they were right, as it showed later. So, following their advice I went to Dhorpatan, despite the Maoists. It was still a peaceful place, but that changed after a couple of years, Maoists were taking over villages, there was a lot of violence and it spilled over to Dhorpatan. I think that was one of the reasons why the medical school was eventually moved to Kathmandu. I left in 1998, after having spent eighteen months there, with some breaks.

How difficult was it to go up and down?

Quite difficult. Normally people would take a bus to nearby towns Baglung or Beni. From there you had to walk four days. Just before Dhorpatan you had to cross a pass called JaJa la on a path winding through the jungle. Dhorpatan is on the southern side of the Himalayas, so it gets the monsoon and that's why there is such rich vegetation; it is very, very beautiful. The bottom of the valley is 3000 meters of altitude; because of the monsoon the hills are covered in rich alpine forest, while Mustang

on the other side of the mountains is a desert.

There are also many medicinal plants growing in Dhorpatan. That's one of the advantages of the school being there – they could collect the medicines from the surrounding hills. Now that the school is in Kathmandu, the students still go to Dhorpatan every summer to collect the plants and learn about them on the spot.

Was the school founded there because of these favorable conditions, do you know?

Well, it may have played a role, but there is also a Tibetan refugee settlement, one of the oldest that was established in the sixties. It is the location of the first Yungdrung Bön temple in exile. Dhorpatan was full of Tibetan refugees in the sixties, and many lamas were among them. I think that Lopon Sangye Tenzin, the teacher of Yongdzin Rinpoche, lived there for a period, as did Yongdzin Rinpoche himself. They all came to Dhorpatan first, and then moved on. Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung was born there, but he went for his education to Menri monastery in India when he was very young.

There are five small villages in the valley; three of them are predominantly Buddhist and two of them are Bonpo. The medical school was situated in the compound of the Bon monastery, Tashi Gégye Thaten Ling.

You must have been isolated from the outside world for those eighteen months. Were there any phones around you could use?

I do not remember but I think there weren't any telephone lines. There were no mobile phones at that time, obviously, and no internet connection either. It was not common even in Europe. I remember that in 1998 somebody told me to try to send an email and I did not know what it was! (laughing)

There is a small town called Burtibang one day walk away from the medical school where I lived, with more facilities. Sometimes I went there to get more interesting food, for example. But I do not remember telephoning anybody.

Otherwise - what was your usual food?

Tsampa every morning. For lunch there was rice and potatoes, occasionally with some dried meat. In the evening it would be thugpa made with rice. And that was every day.

How did you communicate with local people?

With my broken Tibetan. I was able to hold a conversation in Tibetan , but I was not fluent.

Your purpose was to study the education of students of traditional medicine. How did you do?

Amchi Gege, the head of the school, accepted me as a student. It meant that I could be present at any activity of the school. There was also geshe Tenzin Dargye who is now the khenpo of the monastery, and he assisted me a lot, translating for me. Every morning all the students would have their lessons and I would sit with them and watch what they were doing.

Medical schools were part of the monasteries habitually, right?

Yes, traditionally it was like this, and the students were monks, as Amchi Gege was. There have been some very famous medical schools connected with monasteries. And both Triten and Menri

monasteries now have medical schools, but the form of education has been brought up to date. It is no longer necessary to be a monk to study there, and both males and females are accepted as students.

The modernisation of Tibetan medicine education has been going on for a long time. In the early 20th century the Men-Tsee-Khang in Lhasa had moved to a western model of education with a fixed syllabus and exams, now it gives a recognized university education.

How many students were at the school in Dhorpatan when you were there?

They were nine, four of them girls. Monlam, Lhasom, Tsela and Chunsom, and five boys, including Amchi Nyima who many Westerners know from Shenten Dargye Ling. He was older than the others, he had already studied at Menri, in India. Nyima comes from a family lineage of medical practitioners and he had also spent time studying with his father.



Colin Millard and Amchi Nyima became friends then...

You were observing their education day by day. How did it go?

Amchi Gege was a traditional teacher, and a demanding one – the program lasted nine years. But the school already had some modern aspects. Amchi Gege was quite structured and introduced fixed lessons, for example, and some written exams, but the education was very much an apprenticeship with the students learning by assisting him in his medical practice.

As for the theory, he gave one hour of teaching every day, going through the main text of Bumzhi and then explaining it with the help of commentaries. The main commentary and the key text in that

school was written by Kyungtrul Jigme Namkhai Dorje. The lama was a prominent doctor and scholar active in the first half of the 20th century. He was originally from Kham, but he founded a monastery near Mount Kailas, called Guru Gyam. I was curious about this figure and his legacy; I asked Amchi Gege questions about him and later carried out research about him including visiting Guru Gyam.

Did the students have to learn the Bumzhi by heart?

Yes, Amchi Gege placed a high value on memorization and required the students to memorize the whole text. In his view, memorizing is not only providing you with knowledge, it is also a matter of lineage, it is a precise transmission of the sacred words of Tonpa Shenrab. By memorizing them you are identifying with the Buddha of Medicine.

I remember observing memorization exams: the students had to say the part they learned loud in front of Amchi Gege. They had written exams as well.

Bumzhi is quite similar to its Buddhist equivalent, isn't it?

Yes, they are almost identical. When I met Yongdzin Rinpoche, he mentioned the main text the students were studying was the Bumzhi. I was familiar with the main text of Tibetan medicine in the Buddhist tradition, the Gyuzhi, and I was very eager to know the other one. I thought: maybe I was going to discover a new Tibetan medical text that nobody knew (laughing). Then I found out the two texts differ very little, except that in the Bumshi there are more Zhang-Zhung words and a different account of the medical lineage.

The first of the four volumes talks about the origin of the text and uses a tree as a metaphor of the whole medical system. In the Bumshi the medical teaching takes place in Olmolungring and the teaching is given by Tonpa Shenrab to one of his sons, Tribu Trishi who requests it. In the Buddhist version the teaching occurs in the mandala of the Medicine Buddha who emanates two sages representing his speech and mind, and the teaching is given as a dialog between these two emanations.

Some students in Dhorpatan learned from the Bumzhi and some from Gyuzhi.. This was fine with Amchi Gege, as he was convinced that Gyuzhi was copied from Bumzhi and anyway the two texts were almost the same.



Colin Millard at Shenten Dargye Ling, August 2023

As for the practical aspects of the studies - what did you see?

Everything happened in Amchi Gege's room. He would sleep there, everyone had their food there, lessons were given there, and patients would come there - any time during the day. At that time there were two hundred and fifty Tibetans living permanently there, but many people, especially Nepalis, would come to the valley in the summer to grow crops and stayed for three or four months. The valley became quite active in the summer, with around one thousand five hundred Nepalis resident in the valley in that time of the year. The clinic was open to everyone and most of the patients who came were therefore Nepalis. Usually around two patients came each day, sometimes up to seven. And when they came, students learned by assisting Amchi Gege. Occasionally he would ask them to do the diagnosis, feel the pulse, or examine the urine. When he did the diagnosis he would explain to them what he found. In this way the students developed expertise by engaging in the practice of the master, becoming masters themselves under his guidance.

How was Amchi Gegey as a person, did you like being in his presence?

Yes, I did. He was traditional and hard going, but also generous and compassionate. He would treat patients for free if they did not have money to pay for medicines. And he was funny as well. One of the traditional ingredients of a medicine is the wild pig's shit - of course transformed, I think burned into ashes before being used. And I remember him telling his students to be careful to not pick a human one, instead. There are not many toilets up there...

You must have spent lots of time together. Some other interesting or funny memories?

In the evening, we ate thugpa together – after the prayers – and we chatted a bit; sometimes he just would sit with his texts and study. Lama Sangye was there, at that time, too.

I remember that Amchi Gege liked asking questions about the British royal family. My knowledge of British royal family is very limited though (*Colin laughs*) but I tried my best to answer. And I remember, that once, after a pause, he said: my king was born from an egg!

Amchi Gege was from Kham, from Kyungpo. The thing is that the word *kyung* means a “garuda”, an eagle, in Tibetan, and Kyungpo is predominantly a Bonpo area. Red Garuda practice is very common among Bonpos. There are two lineages, the red lineage and the white lineage of *kyung*, and the red one is connected with the kingship in Kyungpo – and that’s what he was talking about.



Amchi Gege and geshe Tenzin Dargye

Amchi Gege said many interesting things. I remember him talking once about infectious diseases. In Tibetan medicine they arise from imbalances in nature caused by a certain kind of enraged spirits. Once he was teaching about *nyene*, which is a disease caused by a spirit called *nyen*. And he said that according to his grandfather there was very little *nyene* in Tibet, but it increased after the first world war.

In remote places like Dhorpatan there are many stories of spirits in lakes, rocks and rivers and how you have to be careful to not disturb them. There are many Bonpo rituals that are concerned with maintaining a balance with the natural world. Quite often, students at medical schools were involved in some of those rituals.

For Amchi Gege, there was a direct link between Bon religion and Bon medicine. He was a monk himself and I think he would have preferred his students to be monks as well. Three of them were monks, they became monks when they entered the school. And because they were monks, they were involved in rituals more than others. When someone got sick with a disease that required a ritual, the students helped Amchi Gege to do it, particularly the monk students, and Amchi Nyima, who comes from a *nagpa* lineage of lay religious practitioners.

[My son will continue the family tradition of Tibetan arts of healing, Amchi Nyima says](#)

Were the rituals part of medical education?

Some rituals which I saw, like the one for *sadak*, *lu* and *nyen* spirits – were done to prevent illness from happening, as a kind of prevention. Others were done as a remedy when people got sick. They include sometimes an offering of an effigy of the person to the spirit asking them to stop causing the harm. There are also soul retrieval rituals to restore the life force of a person.

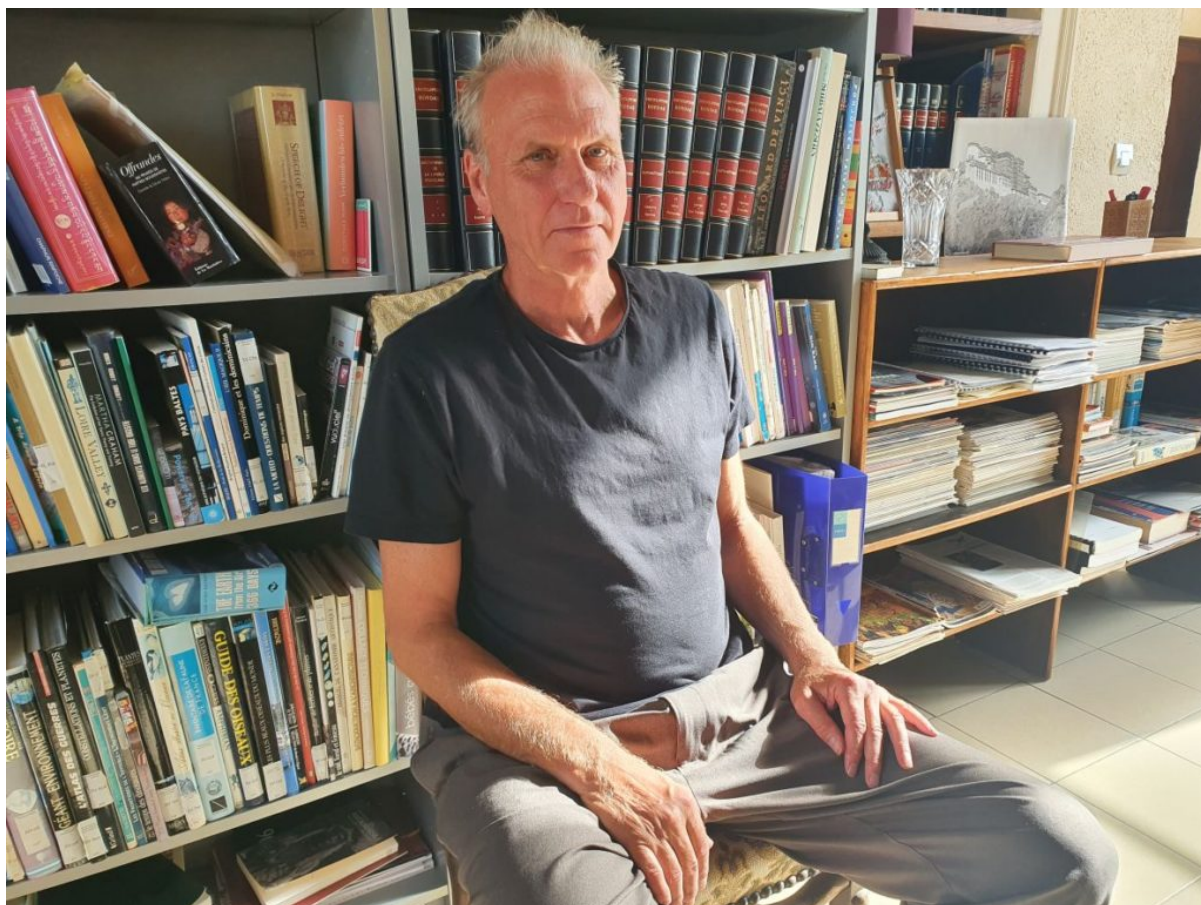
You can diagnose if a sickness is caused by spirits. In the chapter dedicated to diagnosis through examining the pulse there is a section about how to distinguish a disease caused by spirits. There is also a section on this in the chapter on urine diagnosis. I remember Amchi Gege throwing a medicinal powder in the urine and observing what happened and deducing from it which spirit it was who caused the problem. So, to answer your question, yes, it was a part of medical knowledge that Amchi Gege was transmitting to the students.

I described it in detail in my PhD thesis. Maybe I will publish it one day.

Did all the students that you met at the school graduate, eventually?

Five of the students who were there at the time went on to complete their studies. Amchi Gege led the whole mission of transferring the school to Tritten Norbutse where it is now. The students also moved from Dhorpatan to the new location. Those who graduated did it in Kathmandu. The school has continued to enroll more students and several more have completed the course. Amchi Gege passed away a few years after.

Colin studied social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, receiving his MA in 1993 and his PhD in 2002 for a dissertation on 'Learning processes in a Tibetan medical school'. This was based on his fieldwork at a Tibetan Bonpo Medical School situated in the valley of Dhorpatan in west Nepal.



Colin Millard at Shenten Dargye Ling, August 2023

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